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By SARA YOUNG-KNOX

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BERLIN — It was publicized as a ribbon-cutting ceremony, but the invitation-only event was more than that, as Charles Samuels, Jr., director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, came to Androscoggin Valley on Friday to mark the official opening of his bureau's 118th facility, the Federal Correctional Institution Berlin (FCI Berlin).

"It is our Vision that FCI Berlin will become a much sought after work site, given our reputation for outstanding morale and high standards of excellence," Dr. Deborah Schult, warden, wrote in program notes for the staff recognition ceremony.

Mark Belanger, director of the New Hampshire Works office in Berlin said the ceremony recognized the 16 staff members who kept operations running while the facility was waiting for activation funds. The facility was completed in the fall of 2010. Its rated capacity is for 1,152 medium-security inmates, and 128 minimum-security inmates.

"You've got a lot of smiling faces of people I've seen who went through the Talent Team workshops," Belanger said. He said he got a nice thank-you handshake from a new federal employee. The workshops were designed to help local residents through the application process.

The program lists the names of over 130 employees.

"That's going to grow to 240 at full operation," Belanger said. He added that besides the effect of the \$20 million annual payroll, the economic ripple effect will be "tremendous."

"I know walking through today I saw people who had been through our workshops," Diana Nelson of New Hampshire Works, and also a city councilor, said.

"I recognized about 50 faces," Berlin Mayor Paul Grenier said before leaving the prison. "It was fantastic."

Grenier is optimistic the career opportunities at the prison and the economic effect will help keep bright young people in the area.

"This is a win-win for Coos County," Grenier, who also serves as a county commissioner, said.

U.S. Senator Jeanne Shaheen (D) noted that she was governor when then-senator Judd Gregg went to bat for Berlin. As senator, she worked to get activation funding.

The number of people at the ceremony, she said, speaks to the amount of cooperative effort involved in getting the prison up and running. Noting the \$40 million impact on the area's economy, Shaheen said the prison is also important to the federal prison system, which needed

more facilities to address overcrowding.

U.S. Rep. Charlie Bass (R) said he was "really excited" to see the prison open, but that the Congressional delegation needs to keep a bipartisan eye on continued operational funding.

"We know the history of the funding with the start-up issue," he said, calling it "not the end of a battle to protect and preserve" the funding.

It was in 2001, when the pulp and paper facilities in Berlin and Gorham shutdown, that a local businessman read an article in the Wall Street Journal about Cameron, Mo., celebrating the coming of a federal prison.

"They were all excited because of what it was going to do for the town," Berlin resident and retiring state Sen. John Gallus said Saturday. He reasoned that the state prison had been a stabilizing factor in the local economy, a federal prison could do be, too.

"I brought it to Bobby (former mayor Bob Danderson), who got on the phone to Judd Gregg."

Gregg wanted to see that there was support from the community before he went to bat for the city, Gallus recounted.

It was an effort that almost died after a narrow majority of Berlin voters, in a referendum, turned down the idea. Two local men, Tom Boutin and Paul Cusson, led an active campaign to convince residents that a federal prison would be a plus. The city council agreed, after the pair presented a petition, to hold another referendum. The new vote was held after public information sessions held by Androscoggin Valley Economic Recovery Corp. highlighted the positive effects federal prisons have had in other communities. It passed overwhelmingly.

Grenier said the prison will be paying \$1.4 million a year for water and sewer services. "That helps pay for our amortization schedule," he said.

The ceremony was closed to media, but attendees were given a chance to meet with reporters afterward. Director Samuels declined, and through intermediaries said he wanted to spend his time at the prison with the gathered employees and officials at the reception.